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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest values of literature is its power to help children understand change as a natural way of life and adjust to the different situations it brings. This paper presents an annotated bibliography of eighteen children's books that deal with change: "Wilson's World," "The Only Earth We Have," "Hills End," "The Little Fishes," "Two on an Island," "My Side of the Mountain," "Blue in the Seed," "A Girl Called Al," "One to Grow On," "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret," "A Cry in the Wind," "He's My Brother," "Let the Balloon Go," "The Boy Who Wouldn't Talk," "The Musical Palm Tree," "Jambo Means Hello," "Children of Vietnam," and "The Land and People of Cambodia." (TS)

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COPING WITH CHANGE THROUGH LITERATURE

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One of the greatest values of literature is its power to help children understand change as a natural way of life and adjust to the different situations it brings. In the past, children were protected from many of life's unpleasantries and certain issues were avoided in their books; but that practice is changing also. For more than a decade now, there has been a steady increase in the number of books which deal not only with juvenile, personal problems but national and international issues as well.

Children's reading interests as a rule, are influenced by the times in which they live. These young people are concerned about the conflicts which are vital to them; good books can provide a measure of security and help them to realize that change does not always mean peace and contentment.

The news reports on TV, in daily papers, and in magazines vividly portray the unsettled conditions in various parts of the world. The mass media reveal the fact that in our own nation human beings are struggling with urban decay, inflation, racial strife, poverty, unemployment, pollution and political grievances. Elementary children cannot escape the disturbing influence of these stressful conditions since they hear and read some of the same information as adults. Upon watching the six o'clock news on TV, they become witnesses to the horrors

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of war and violent demonstrations by angry adults so they are fully aware of the hostilities and misunderstandings of the adult world.

The side effects of these experiences are sometimes reflected in the behavior of children, and the conditions have given rise to a new kind of language usage among them. Some old words have taken on new meanings (crunch, freeze, pot, horse) and some new words have been added (life style, copout, toke, Ms.). There must have been a time when words like involvement, survival, identity, realistic, commitment, and relevance were used mainly to express adult concerns--but they are now in common use by grade school youngsters. And because they understand the human implications of these terms they are demanding books that satisfy their needs in respect to them.

The current awareness of pollution problems and the overuse of natural resources is finding expression in literature, and concern for the natural environment is reflected in a growing number of children's books on various levels.

A primary book entitled Wilson's World[13] tells the story of a little boy who paints his own bright, beautiful world--but as this beautiful world fills up with people, it also fills up with cars, factories and smog. Because of this, Wilson paints another world--a better world with people who want to keep it clean and beautiful.

In The Only Earth We Have[17] the author discusses the dangers to humankind, if the earth's resources continue to be plundered--and describes what can be done to preserve and protect

THE ONLY EARTH WE HAVE.

These might be considered preventative measures, but other kinds of reactions are presented in books where children face the world and manage to survive through their own efforts. Such books are Hills End[18] The Little Fishes,[12] Two on an Island,[4] and My Side of the Mountain.[10]

The Little Fishes is a book that tells about a courageous 12-year-old boy who wanders around the bombed city of Naples in 1943. After his mother's death, Guido is ever mindful of her advice that "the two worthwhile things in life are love and strength." In the following statement, Guido proves that he has both: "It is understanding that makes the difference between us and animals, and when you understand, you can feel a kind of happiness in the worst misery."

My Side of the Mountain relates the experiences of Sam Gribley who becomes a little fed up with his crowded family conditions and other pressures of city apartment living, so he decides to try his hand at living alone in the wooded areas of the Catskill Mountains. During the year he spends there, he not only survives but demonstrates self-sufficiency and comes out a more mature person. There is evidence that some of today's nonconforming young people approve of living in a similar fashion.

Children of today are concerned about acceptance, relevancy, and identity. They are demanding to know who they are; they want to know who they are physically and socially. I believe that the demands are a way of asking for reassurance. Youngsters are

also concerned about security; they want to know where they fit in the larger society; they want to know how they rate with their teachers, parents and peers. I think the demands might also mean that they are looking for someone or something a bit more powerful than themselves. The resonating cries for relevant books could very well mean that they are seeking a firmer grip on reality--some kind of rock beneath their feet to provide greater security in this period of world tension, doubt, and skepticism.

Literature is one of the best ways to provide for identity and security. Through good books, children can achieve self understanding--and in doing so, they are in a better position to understand others and cope with the world around them. Among the many good books to help in achieving these goals are those that follow.

Blue in the Seed [14] is the story of a young Korean boy who suffers pain and embarrassment because he is different. Bok Chun has blue eyes and this is a very unusual characteristic in Korea. Blue eyes were the source of the boy's unhappiness and yet it was through them that he found peace within himself.

A girl Called Al [11] discusses the grim realities that Al has to face. Al is a brilliant nonconformist whose divorced mother leaves her alone in the apartment most of the time, so she develops a friendship with a girl in a nearby apartment. As their friendship grows, Al's insecurity and loneliness are revealed in contrast to her friend's happy family life, but Al is no longer lonely.

One to Grow On [16] describes the inner feelings of 12-year-

old Janie, who is unsure of her friends and family, so she continually justifies herself by lying. A vacation with her grandmother gives Janie a new outlook on life as she learns to enjoy her freedom and friends for what they are--and when this happens, her lying becomes a thing of the past.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret reveals the great importance of peer acceptance. Margaret, who is almost twelve has not filled out in the "right places" yet, so she constantly asks God to help her to be "normal" in all the ways her friends are.

The growing trend toward integrating special children into the regular classrooms has resulted in a large number of books dealing with handicapped children. These changes which affect 'normal' children as well as those with special needs can be successfully implemented through book actvities which alleviate the classroom transition for both groups. The following books which present life in a realistic manner can be used effectively with appropriate classes.

A Cry in the Wind [6] is the story of a young boy who learns to accept his handicap and develops a sense of self worth through the help of an understanding teacher.

He's My Brother [15] reveals a growing understanding among siblings. Because Jamie is slow and awkward, he is a constant source of irritation to his older brother, who finally realizes that he, himself, is not perfect.

Let the Balloon Go [19] presents the exciting and challenging achievement of John Summer, a spastic child who is imprisoned in

a body he hates. His mind is filled with fantasies and through them, he performs great deeds which make him the object of admiration by his school mates. It is his physical feat, however, that changes the attitudes of his parents.

In The Boy Who Wouldn't Talk,[3] Carlos was frustrated because he had trouble adjusting to a new language. He refused to talk--except through sign language--until he became friends with a boy who could not read his signs and gestures.

Children can benefit greatly by reading books which help them to cope with change in the home, school and community, but ultimately they must be prepared to deal with diverse cultures in our pluralistic society and learn to function effectively in a shrinking world that brings frequent contacts with peoples from many countries.

No problem of our time is more urgent than that of establishing peaceful relations among peoples of the world, among nations and individual members of groups. By identifying with book characters, a reader can better understand peoples from other cultures, for it is then possible for him/her to see situations from their points of view. And as a result of this increased understanding "those people" begin to seem less alien. Through honest books, children can get to really know peoples from many countries--how they live, what contributions they have made to world progress, and what values they hold dear. This is a most important function of literature, for only through books are we allowed to freely enter the private thoughts of those who are different from ourselves. The

following books can provide the knowledge and sensitivity to transcend the barriers to world understanding.

The Musical Palm Tree [1] is a story of Puerto Rica and it relates the experiences of a small boy, Pablito, and his efforts to make enough money to buy a mantilla for his mother. Pablito, acting as a guide takes the reader on a tour of special places in San Juan.

Jambo Means Hello [8] can be used with both primary and intermediate grade children for it contains a list of meaningful definitions which relate to the African people and honestly describe a way of life. The book evokes a feeling of community which is representative of the African culture.

The last two books deliver a heart-rending message, nevertheless, they are realistic and they have special significance for the situation in today's changing world. The situations which they depict are sad, "but it does not hurt the child to read about them unless his gradual development of a concern for others is considered wrong (Burch, 1973, p.285)."

Children of Vietnam [9] affirms that none of the children of today's Vietnam has ever known peace, not the protected child of the wealthy southern family who has not seen fighting nearby, nor the child of the refugee family living in the squalid refugee camp, nor the child of Saigon--whether he is living with his family, or is a child of the streets. Children who represent these and other aspects of vietnamese life must be known if one is to understand what war does.

The Land and People of Cambodia [7] discusses Cambodia's long history of conflict and conquest. It describes the changing social structure and cultural evolution as a background in understanding the role of this small nation in Asian history and its place in today's world.

Discussion and other activities involving books such as those mentioned can help children develop sensitivity to the language of others, and achieve the kind of understanding necessary to cope in today's changing world.

In recognizing the universal qualities of humanity, books encourage children to do likewise. If the leaders of tomorrow's world are to cope with today's changing world, they need to be guided by the vision that good books can provide. The concept of global community has made neighbors of the peoples of every land, so it is important for youngsters to begin to assume the responsibility of thinking and planning with peoples of all nations. Literature can help them to prepare for this role of world citizenship.

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